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BIG YEAR: Taylor Swift's "1989" has earned critical and commercial praise in Swift's first outright pop album. Tribune night editor Rob Burgess has no problem admitting he at least enjoyed it in 2014.

The best albums of 2014: the remix

By Rob Burgess
Tribune night editor

In 2014, my son was born. This fact is the most amazing thing to ever happen to me. It has also been the most all-encompassing. I never realized how much time I had to relax, play guitar, watch movies and listen to music until I had almost none.

During one of the few moments of the past six months in which I wasn't sleeping, cleaning, playing with my kid, working or driving, I watched comedian Bill Burr's new special on Netflix, "I'm Sorry You Feel That Way." His bit about raising a child and then going back and listening to your favorite music only to find it as dated as Glenn Miller's "In The Mood" hit a bit too close to home.

So, I was thrilled when my co-worker Martin Slagter hooked me up with selections from his top five albums of 2014. You may have read his rundown from the Dec. 26, 2014, paper. I may not be quite as tuned in to what's new in popular culture as I once was, but I wanted to take this opportunity to respond with fresh ears to what I've been missing. (Note: The ranking and selections are Martin's not mine. I'm not even remotely qualified to put together such a list for 2014.)

5. Spoon - 'They Want My Soul'

I admit to losing track of Spoon after 2005's "Gimme Fiction," but certainly not because I ever disliked the band. From the first track of this, "Rent I Pay," it's clear they seem to be riding the same vibe as I remember from a decade ago. "Rainy Taxi" sounds like a deep cut from some long-lost '70s album. "Do You" is the funkier track I heard. One of the criticisms I've heard of this album is it sounds too much like previous Spoon recordings and doesn't push their sound into any new territory. I disagree, but even if it's true, what's wrong with knowing your strengths? I can see why they picked "They Want My Soul" as the album name, not only is this a great track, but as Martin pointed out, it's also indicative of the jealousy every other band of this genre undoubtedly must be feeling. Sadly for the charlatans, you can't fake the funk.

4. Taylor Swift - '1989'

I had never really listened to Taylor Swift before this year. I'd of course heard some ubiquitous singles everyone else had absorbed, but I had never spun one of her albums from front to back. I'm happy she's just gone ahead and admitted this is pop music, not country. When I hear most modern country I invariably recall the chorus of that Waylon Jennings song, "Are you sure Hank [Williams, Sr.] done it this way?" I have no problem with pop music when it's done well, and "1989" is a solid album with monster singles like "Shake It Off" and "Blank Space," and album cuts like "Bad Blood" and

“Out of the Woods.” Even if you hate pop music, if it’s going to exist anyway, wouldn’t you rather it be of a certain quality?

3. Real Estate - ‘Atlas’

Well, I can’t blame missing out on Real Estate on my kid. This is apparently their third album and they have been together since 2009. I have never heard this band before, but I really enjoyed this album. “Talking Backwards” is my favorite track, which followed by “April’s Song” is a smooth instrumental. I can totally see listening to this again and exploring the band’s previous work. I agree with Marty: the heavy influence of I.R.S.-era R.E.M. is apparent from the first note. This is just extremely pleasant jangle pop.

2. Sharon Van Etten - ‘Are We There’

At a more depressed time in my life, I can totally see myself enjoying this more. Maybe it’s the weather outside right now, but I just don’t see myself voluntarily listening to this album again. “Break my legs so I won’t walk to you. Cut my tongue so I can’t talk to you. Burn my skin so I can’t feel you. Stab my eyes so I can’t see,” she sings on “Your Love Is Killing Me.” Yeesh. This is probably the only disagreement I have with Martin on this list. (I will say I agree that “Every Time the Sun Comes Up” is among the most memorable cuts.) Maybe I’m just not in the right head space for this right now.

1. The War on Drugs - 'Lost in the Dream'

Tasty. The opening song, "Under The Pressure" sounds like what would happen if Don Henley was actually good. I knew I would like this album as it's from the Bloomington-based Secretly Canadian, and I have found myself consistently enjoying this record company's output. This album is melancholy, but is propelled along by hopeful spirit, like in "An Ocean In Between The Waves." Songs like "Disappearing" make effective use of synthesizers. "Eyes To The Wind" lays his Dylan influence bare. This album was incredibly atmospheric, and, to quote the title, dreamy.

Rob Burgess, Tribune night editor, may be reached by calling 765-454-8577, via email at rob.burgess@kokomotribune.com or on Twitter at twitter.com/robaburg.